

## The Future that threatens us and the Future that Calls us to Change—Both Are Here

By Forrest E. Harris, Sr.

Nearly forty years ago, I read a book entitled Living with Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Compassion, edited by Tilden H. Edwards, founder of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. The threat then of a nuclear meltdown was prominent in our global psyche needing vital resources to inspire an alternative future. Apocalypse means “to uncover, to reveal.” What is revealed and uncovered today in the crisis of race, policing, gun violence and national politics are the worst of America and the best possibilities for a different America. Apocalypse is not familiar or popular public language to inspire serious conversations about the racial meltdown associated with the “black, white, brown and blue crisis in our country. This word, nevertheless, demands an honest and deeper critique of what is being uncovered in America’s national political character and the crisis of race—the systematic history of white supremacy remains the nation’s chief moral problem at a deeper level than ever before.

Apocalypse conveys something beyond its origins in an ancient religious world view of doom and the destruction of life. It speaks poignantly, not only to the heavy losses and grief the nation is now experiencing, but also compels us to look critically at what is being exposed and to face the trauma and reality of the people’s

unwillingness to bear, under this system, the burden of human diminishment, humiliation, social and physical death.

The recent Louisiana, Minnesota, and Texas killings represent an uncovering the nation can no longer afford to placate. The killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile by police and the sniper murders of eight police officers in Baton Rouge and Dallas represents two things: (1) the worst outcomes of America's systemic racism and (2) the best possibilities for a different America. This deadly exposition will not allow, under the guise of civil rights progress, living with illusions about race in America. The country's moral and racial imagination has been diseased by systematic racism far too long. This uncovering will not allow us to live with illusions about race in America any longer. Camera technology on cell phones has uncovered and revealed over and over again what victims of raced-based systems of injustice have known since the days of slavery and over decades of racial injustice. America's continuing dilemmas of race, causes "soul and physical murder" and must be changed or are bound to implode within the denials and false claims of a colorblind society. This uncovering reveals that civil rights progress has not eliminated the deep entrenchment of dominant supremacist values responsible for the nation's racial divide that continues the blockade of radical change.

The national consensus is that we must have conversations about racism and race-based systems of injustice that have made policing a deadly force for black and brown people in this country. The recent White House and CNN Town Hall meetings

about the U.S. racial divide have initiated conversations to encourage hard dialogue about race in America. A July 13<sup>th</sup> op-ed piece by Journalism Professor Robert Jensen in The Dallas Morning News - *Nation of Change*, suggests that starting these conversation should be done by: “(1) remembering that the United States is the wealthiest and most powerful country in the history of the world and (2) realizing that this wealth and power has depended on the idea of white supremacy. Recognize that the material comfort of the United States is the product of three racialized holocausts, rationalized by white supremacy.” If our national forums and conversations avoid examining the systems that produce the anguish, anger, pain, and heavy lament upon the nation’s citizenry, the country will be destroyed by it, or swallowed up by repeated cycles of social apathy and fatalism. We must find a way to identify, face, live with and express the sufferings that supremacist systems of racism have inflicted upon our national psyche and the horror, fear, trauma, physical and social death it visits upon vulnerable communities.

We have seen America’s dark night of racism before, now racism is once again at the center of the need for critical conversation. But this time, white police officers are being killed which adds a new dynamism and urgency to the debate about race relations in America. Social and physical death caused by racism leaves none of us untouched. We need not repeat the mistakes of previous conversations that did not focus on the pathology that racism creates, and in the case of state authorized policing, demand radical change in policy and criminal justice reform.

This uncovering of apocalypse asks the question: is there enough humanity left within the national body politic to face America's truth? Is there enough love and courage in Americans to let justice and compassion shape a new future? Only this depth of moral resolve makes these conversations of national benefit end our habitual methods of racialized thinking and acting. How we break out of the conceptual blocks and supremacist legacies of prejudice, power and control now fueling the black, white, brown and blue racial divide is imperative for this national dialogue. At stake is the ultimate diminishment of our collective humanity.

President Barack Obama's words to the families of the slain Dallas and Baton Rouge police officers referenced the nation's racial impasse as "deep fault lines in our democracy, now more exposed than in the recent past." Hopeful optimism was expressed as an appeal for a more honest and deeper critique of systemic racism in this country. The urgent need for conversation is not to assuage the mixtures of national pain, grief, rage, and anger. Rather, it is to further ripen our resolve and readiness for fundamental change, moral action, inclusion, equality, and other justice measures for social transformation.

Our government has been bipolar and bipartisan when race and racism are the topics. Personal bias and prejudice at one level and institutional and structural racism at another level are intertwined requiring more than good will and charitable allocations that leave the status quo in place. This crisis has brought the nation to a serious tipping point in the politics of race relations. The call for

transformative change must take place at all levels of America's institutional life, with nothing short of a determination to turn the nation toward a just and humane existence, particularly concerning urban impoverishment and marginalized communities where Black lives and other minority group lives have not mattered.

A sustained dialogue will speak to the reality of racism lodged in the American public character. A momentous crisis is taking place in a spiritual and political environment that exposes the volcanic sheathing of systematic racism pushing this nation to the edge of doom. Either we commit to a future that values freedom and opportunity that calls us to justice, or we accept the consequences of spiritual and political death. The carnage of those who recently died and the persons who caused their deaths cannot be isolated in the immoral determinations of individual hate, but they are victims of a culture of poverty, race, gun violence and hate of which we must all take responsibility.

This moment of crises undeniably has given greater exposure to the hidden histories and meaning, buried under centuries of white supremacy and racial memory. Systematic racism cannot be spoken of without being informed by its beginnings in the American moral, religious and political imagination. For some people to say racism has nothing to do with what happened in the recent tragic killings is to live with the delusions of America's original sin. Policing has to match our twenty-first-century reality which needs cultural competence and education on both sides of the racial divide. The stories of families whose pain tells their personal

narrative must be heard as often as possible. Those who have struggled against the brutal history of racism must speak out in the public conversations. We can all prepare for genuine listening to these stories by deepening our cultural competence and understanding of why race still matters. We can start by reading, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* by Kelly Brown Douglass, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson or *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Era of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander. These testimonials call for honesty about our racial memory and the continuing impact of racism on black life in the criminal justice system.

Referring to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “what killed the president is just as important as who killed him.” We know the “what” that is responsible for the triangle killings of Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, and the police officers who put themselves in the way of harm to protect protesters. It is at the core our struggle to find justice and solutions to homicidal policing practices. The Emmanuel AME Church massacre in South Carolina, the sidewalk killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, the chokehold death of Eric Garner are part of the long litany of deaths that lurk in the dark recesses of a supremacist system because of a refusal to deal with what killed them.

When the black community saw the video of the close-range shooting of Alton Sterling by police who wrestled him to the ground and fatally ended his life, black people had a flashback of images of white police officers using water hoses, dogs,

and batons to beat black people marching for freedom in the 1960s. The past is never over when it continues to manifest systemic evils in new forms in the present. Martyrs have always displayed the courage to save us from the worst of America's racism and injustice. We see this heroism in the young people shouting in the streets "no justice, no peace." We do not have to choose sides between the moral universalism of "all lives matter" and the particularism of "Black Lives Matter." The demand of justice and love crosses all cultures and communities. Racial memory connects the recent killings to the 1955 killings of Emmett Till and the 1944 electric chair execution of 14-year-old George Stinney in South Carolina and to the massacre of the Emanuel AME Church nine in that same state in 2015. The immorality of racism and the cultural phobias of hate inherent in America's supremacist psychology produced these evil events. We should not forget the Orlando Pulse Night Club massacre targeting the LGBTQ community, or the Islamophobia in the country have grown in the same seedbed of hate.

The nation's apocalypse is here because we have lived with illusions, especially the illusion that America has been a justice- freedom- and loving nation, committed to the equality and flourishing of all its citizens. We must face America's truth, from its constitutional exclusion of indigenous people to decades of denial of voting rights to black citizens, and a criminal justice and judicial system that increasingly disproportionately incarcerates black and brown people.

The trauma of our national pain peels back layers of supremacist values of white privilege and power that have obscured the ground of freedom and justice upon which we all stand. Neither caustic debates nor the respectability of political corrective will reverse the breakdown of stable community and civility.

In this moment of national catharsis and cleansing we are worn and weary of the bombardment of a commercial culture of power politics that fuels hate and division and commodifies and destroys the bodies of black, brown, and poor people.

Policing reform is needed nationwide. We must pause as columnist Charles Blow recently stated to understand how dehumanizing it is that black parents have to drill their sons and daughters and have conversation equating to a survival toolkit of behavior for them to avoid possible deadly force during a routine police stop. This compliance tool-kit to respect authority mimics, in character, the police power of the Jim Crow-era vagrancy laws that criminalized black people for being homeless and jobless.

Whether or not this moment will be a new beginning of justice and uncovering of the beauty and sacredness of life all Americans desire depends on our willingness to let truth, love and justice shape and transform a new reality. It perhaps is overly optimistic that humanizing the practices of white-supremacist privilege and power will not push radical change to the margins. But a new beginning is possible if we all step into this moral urgency of justice and cease the diminishing of the humanity that is the sacred ground of our life together. As America's first Black President,



Barak Obama represents a symbol of progress overcoming America's dark past of racial prejudice and discrimination. His call for honest dialogue about systematic racial injustice presents us with the highest moral mandate to love our neighbors with justice and compassion in the way that commits the nation's fiscal resources for social justice for all Americans as our first step toward a new humanization for the whole world.

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